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The MIND Diet: A Detailed Guide for Beginners

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What it is | Foods to eat | Foods to avoid | What does the research say? | Meal plan | The bottom line

Key takeaways

- The MIND diet combines elements of the Mediterranean and DASH diets to improve brain health and reduce the risk of dementia.
- This diet encourages the consumption of foods like green leafy vegetables, berries, nuts, olive oil, and fish, while limiting butter, cheese, red meat, fried foods, and sweets.
- Research suggests that following the MIND diet may reduce oxidative stress and inflammation, potentially slowing the decline in brain function, though more studies are needed.

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"MIND" stands for "Mediterranean-DASH Intervention for Neurodegenerative Delay." It is a combination diet that is designed to reduce the risk of dementia and loss of brain function as you age.

This article is a detailed guide for beginners, with everything you need to know about the MIND diet and how to follow it.

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What is the MIND diet?

The MIND diet aims to reduce dementia and the decline in brain health that often occurs as people get older. It combines aspects of two very popular diets, the Mediterranean diet and the Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) diet.

Many experts regard these diets as two of the healthiest diets. Research has shown that they can lower blood pressure and reduce the risk of heart disease, diabetes, and several other diseases.

Researchers wanted to create a diet specifically to help improve brain function and prevent dementia. To do this, they combined foods from both diets that had been shown to benefit brain health.

For example, the Mediterranean and DASH diets both recommend eating a lot of fruit. Fruit intake has been linked with improved brain function, but berries, in particular, are supported by the strongest evidence.

Thus, the MIND diet encourages eating berries but does not emphasize consuming fruit in general.

Currently, there are no set guidelines for how to follow the MIND diet. You can simply eat more of the 9 foods that the diet encourages and eat less of the 5 foods that it recommends you limit.

The next two sections discuss which foods to eat and which to avoid on the diet.

9 foods to eat on the MIND diet

Here is a list of nine foods that the MIND diet encourages:

- **Green, leafy vegetables:** Aim for six or more servings per week. This includes kale, spinach, cooked greens, and salads.
- **All other vegetables:** Try to eat another vegetable in addition to the green leafy vegetables at least once per day. It's best to choose non-starchy vegetables because they provide a lot of nutrients for a low number of calories.
- **Berries:** Eat berries at least twice per week. Berries such as strawberries, blueberries, raspberries, and blackberries all have antioxidant benefits.

- **Nuts:** Try to get five or more servings of nuts each week. The creators of the MIND diet don't specify what kind of nuts to consume, but it is probably best to vary the type of nuts you eat to obtain a variety of nutrients.
- **Olive oil:** Use olive oil as your main cooking oil. Check out this article for information about the safety of cooking with olive oil.

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grains like oatmeal, quinoa, brown rice, whole wheat pasta, and 100% whole wheat bread.

- **Fish:** Eat fish at least once per week. It is best to choose fatty fish such as salmon, sardines, trout, tuna, and mackerel for their high amounts of omega-3 fatty acids.
- **Beans:** Include beans in at least four meals per week. This category includes all beans, lentils, and soybeans.
- **Poultry:** Try to eat chicken or turkey at least twice per week. Note that fried chicken is not encouraged on the MIND diet.

If you're unable to consume the target number of servings, don't quit the MIND diet altogether. Research has shown that following the MIND diet even to a moderate degree is associated with a reduced risk of Alzheimer's disease and cognitive impairment.

When you're following the diet, you can eat more than just these 10 foods. However, the more you stick to the diet, the better your results may be.

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5 foods to avoid on the MIND diet

The MIND diet recommends limiting the following five foods:

- **Butter and margarine:** Try to eat less than 1 tablespoon (about 14 grams) daily. Instead, try using olive oil as your primary cooking fat and dipping your bread in olive oil with herbs.
- **Cheese:** The MIND diet recommends eating cheese less than once per week.

- **Red meat:** Aim for no more than three servings per week. This category includes all beef, pork, lamb, and products made from these meats.
- **Fried food:** The MIND diet highly discourages fried food, especially the kind from fast-food restaurants. Limit your consumption to less than once per week.
- **Pastries and sweets:** This includes most of the processed snack foods and desserts you may think of — ice cream, cookies, brownies, snack cakes, doughnuts, candy, and more. Try to limit these to no more than four times per week.

Researchers encourage limiting your consumption of these foods because they contain saturated fats.

Studies have found that trans fats are associated with several diseases, including heart disease and even Alzheimer's disease. However, the health effects of saturated fat are widely debated in the nutrition world.

It's worth noting that partially hydrogenated oils (the major source of trans fats in the food supply) have been banned by the Food and Drug Administration since 2020. They're still naturally found in much lower amounts in fried foods, dairy, or red meat, but margarine, pastries, and sweets are no longer a major source.

Research on the MIND diet and brain health

The first official paper on the MIND diet was published in 2015. Since then, researchers have performed additional studies to investigate its benefits for brain health.

A 2023 study found that middle-aged adults who closely adhered to the MIND diet had faster information processing speeds than those who did not closely follow the diet.

A 2022 randomized clinical trial found that those who followed a calorie-restricted MIND diet for three months had higher scores for working memory, verbal recognition memory, and attention compared to the calorie-restricted control group.

That said, more research is still needed to gauge the true effectiveness of the MIND diet.

The MIND diet may decrease oxidative stress and inflammation

Current research on the MIND diet has not been able to determine exactly how it works. However, scientists think it may work by reducing oxidative stress and inflammation.

Oxidative stress occurs when unstable molecules called free radicals accumulate in the body in large amounts. This often causes damage to cells. The brain is especially vulnerable to this type of damage.

Inflammation is your body's natural response to injury and infection. But if it's not properly regulated, inflammation can also be harmful and contribute to many chronic disease.

Together, oxidative stress and inflammation can be quite detrimental to your brain. In recent years, they have been the focus of some interventions to prevent and treat Alzheimer's disease.

Following the Mediterranean and DASH diets has been associated with lower levels of oxidative stress and inflammation.

Because the MIND diet is a hybrid of these two diets, the foods that make up the MIND diet probably also have antioxidant and anti-inflammatory effects.

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A sample meal plan for 1 week

Making meals for the MIND diet doesn't have to be complicated.

Focus your meals on the 10 foods and food groups that are encouraged on the diet, and try to stay away from the 5 foods that the diet recommends limiting.

Here's a 7-day meal plan to get you started:

Monday

- **Breakfast:** Greek yogurt with raspberries and sliced almonds
- **Lunch:** Mediterranean salad with olive oil-based dressing, grilled chicken, whole wheat pita
- **Dinner:** burrito bowl with brown rice, black beans, fajita vegetables, grilled chicken, salsa, and guacamole

Tuesday

- **Breakfast:** whole wheat toast with almond butter, scrambled eggs
- **Lunch:** grilled chicken sandwich, blackberries, carrots
- **Dinner:** grilled salmon, side salad with olive oil-based dressing, brown rice

Wednesday

- **Breakfast:** steel-cut oatmeal with strawberries, hard-boiled eggs
- **Lunch:** Mexican-style salad with mixed greens, black beans, red onion, corn, grilled chicken, and olive oil-based dressing
- **Dinner:** chicken and vegetable stir-fry, brown rice

Thursday

- **Breakfast:** Greek yogurt with peanut butter and banana
- **Lunch:** baked trout, collard greens, black-eyed peas
- **Dinner:** whole wheat spaghetti with turkey meatballs and marinara sauce, side salad with olive oil-based dressing

Friday

- **Breakfast:** whole wheat toast with avocado, omelet with peppers and onions
- **Lunch:** chili made with ground turkey
- **Dinner:** Greek-seasoned baked chicken, oven-roasted potatoes, side salad, whole wheat dinner roll

Saturday

- **Breakfast:** overnight oats with strawberries and almond butter
- **Lunch:** fish tacos on whole wheat tortillas, brown rice, coleslaw, and pinto beans
- **Dinner:** chicken gyro on whole wheat pita, cucumber and tomato salad

Sunday

- **Breakfast:** spinach frittata, sliced apple with peanut butter
- **Lunch:** tuna salad sandwich on whole wheat bread, plus carrots and celery with hummus
- **Dinner:** curry chicken, brown rice, lentils, and a side salad

Most salad dressings you find at the store are not made primarily with olive oil, but you can easily make your own salad dressing at home.

To make a simple balsamic vinaigrette, combine 3 parts extra-virgin olive oil with 1 part balsamic vinegar. Add a little Dijon mustard, salt, and pepper and mix well.

The bottom line

The MIND diet was created to help prevent dementia and slow the decline in brain function that can happen with age.

The diet encourages consuming vegetables, berries, nuts, whole grains, olive oil, fish, beans, and poultry.

These foods contain many nutrients that promote good brain health, possibly by reducing oxidative stress, inflammation.

Early research shows that closely following the MIND diet is associated with a lower risk of Alzheimer's disease and slower loss of brain function over time. However, more research is needed to understand the diet's effects.

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SOURCES HISTORY

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